



# International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage

Volume 8  
Issue 7 *The Impact of COVID-19 on Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*

Article 2


2020

## Reflecting on the Impact of COVID-19 on Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage

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### Recommended Citation

Raj, Razaq and Griffin, Kevin A. (2020) "Reflecting on the Impact of COVID-19 on Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 8: Iss. 7, Article 2.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/8f91-6z16>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol8/iss7/2>

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# Reflecting on the Impact of COVID-19 on Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage

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COVID-19 is devastating the religious tourism industry in terms of economic, social, food, employment and faith related impacts. Pilgrimages are being stopped, and mass gatherings are halted. We are in middle of a very difficult time for the religious tourism industry and this has become a major concern for governments around the world. The leading nations such as USA, UK, Italy, Spain, Japan, Russia, Germany and China are struggling to control the COVID-19 pandemic. We are facing the biggest test of the tourism industry in over half a century, one which has exceeded the downturn of the 9/11 terrorism attacks. In the last 6-9 months, COVID-19 has had major ramifications for the religious tourism industry and impacted on other related industries like hotels, transport, travel agents and tour organisers, tour guides and all tourism service industries. The calamity of the COVID-19 pandemic is a new biological war that is being experienced by the whole world and the tourism industry is one of the major victim of this pandemic outbreak.

Academics, politicians, scientists, theologians, in fact all people are discussing the impact of COVID-19 on all aspects of life. The pandemic impact is being experienced by all people regardless of state, religion, race, age or status. It is not first time, nor the last time that the world has been struck by a pandemic, but commentators suggest that a new world will emerge from this, and this new reality will offer new opportunities for the provision of experience by the tourism industry.

The implication of COVID-19 for pilgrimage to religious sites has been enormous, and has altered the thinking and beliefs of visitors. Due to limitations and controls imposed by governments, new forms to spirituality and worship have been introduced, and these lead to the development of alternative religious thinking. This paper seeks to clarify the impact of COVID-19 on the religious tourism industry and discusses the challenges experienced by travellers to religious destinations.

**Key Words:** COVID-19, pilgrimage, pandemic, visitors, tourism industry

## Introduction

Pandemics and epidemics have always been part of human civilization and have always effected human lives. The COVID-19 pandemic first manifested in China and was reported by in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province in November 2019. Later in December, Wuhan hospital informed the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and health commissions about this new viral outbreak. COVID-19 spread rapidly all over the world and since then it has proven very difficult to control the transmission of the disease. The intensity of virus has created major shock waves around the globe.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on religious tourism and major world religious services. Pilgrimages, religious events and festivals have been cancelled and places of worship of all faiths have been closed. In many locations, religious tourism was already struggling over the last 3 decades due to wars, conflicts, disputes and terrorism. These challenges have left holy sites and religious heritage areas with major challenges from which to recover, and in some vulnerable situations, even to survive. Religious tourists and pilgrims have played a key role in keeping many holy sites open With the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, recovery without help from national governments, international agencies and aid organisations may be impossible.

The world economy is struggling to survive. COVID-19 has created a major challenge for global socio-economic systems, which are struggling to cope and deal with the vulnerabilities that have developed in the financial markets, global supply systems and international relations. The effect on the religious tourism industry is enormous. COVID-19 is having devastating impacts on economic, social, food, employment and faith practices as religious activities and pilgrimages are being stopped. We are in middle of very difficult time for the religious tourism industry and it has become a major concern for all governments and religions around the world. The tourism and hospitality industries are struggling for survival and facing major challenges to re-design their business models to meet current and post COVID-19 pandemic regulations. According to the United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2020):

*The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a 22% fall in international tourist arrivals during the first quarter of 2020 ... the crisis could lead to an annual decline of between 60% and 80% when compared with 2019 figures. This places millions of livelihoods at risk and threatens to roll back progress made in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNWTO, 2020).*

Academics, politicians, scientists, theologians and ordinary people are all discussing the impact of COVID-19 on all industries. The impact is being experienced by all people regardless of state, religion, ethnicity, age or status. It is not first time, nor the last time that world has been struck by a pandemic, and history suggests that a new world will emerge from this. This new reality will need to be accommodated by the tourism industry as visitors seek new experiences and interactions.

The implication of COVID-19 for pilgrimage to religious sites has changed the thinking and beliefs of visitors and site managers. As governments introduced restrictions and control measures, new forms of spirituality and alternative religious thinking have developed. This paper seeks to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the religious tourism industry and discuss the changes which will be experienced by visitors to religious sites. This is a timely assessment of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to sacred spaces on a global stage and related pilgrimage activities, faith systems and quasi-religious activities.

## COVID-19 Challenges for Religious Tourism

In the current literature there is very little research exploring the understanding and impact of COVID-19 on religious tourists' patterns of visitation to sacred sites. This issue of the *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, seeks to go some way towards addressing this lacuna

Religious and ceremonial sites around the world have been the focus of journeys promoting pilgrimage worship, spiritual well-being and visitation. Visitation to the leading world religious sites has been growing and the significance of religious journeys and the emergence and development of pilgrimage has not been stopped by conflicts. Pilgrim motivations range from strict adherence to faith, to broader forms of spirituality, and even secular motivations; thus the objectives have changed considerably in recent times. As a result, religious tourism is very resilient and will meet the challenges posed by the COVID-19. Host countries and communities now see great benefits in religious tourism as a means of socio-cultural exchange, regional development, economic development and environmental enhancements.

In many instances, the religious tourism industry has adapted to pilgrim demands which reflect increased contemporary consumerism and hedonistic behaviour. In other instances, pilgrimages have remained almost unaltered for many generations. The problematic and uncomfortable relationship between pure pilgrimage and religious travel as part of the secular tourism industry is well displayed in typologies of pilgrimage (Collins-Kreiner, 2018). These models attempt to explore the differences between the accidental religious tourist, the historical or culturally focused traveller who uses religion as a focal point and the pilgrim who travels for religious and spiritual reasons. A further layer (as discussed by Griffin and Raj, 2015) is the range and scale of motivational influences which range from domestic to international in a complex interplay of globalised motivations. This heterogeneity of traveller motivation is one of the factors that leads to this sector being such a resilient and robust sector of the travel and tourism industries.

Raj & Griffin (2015b) highlight that both historical and contemporary visitor motivation related to religious tourism and pilgrimage results in the act of travel regardless of challenges and risks. They introduced discourses on content theory and process theory highlighting the work of Maslow (1954) and Herzberg (1974) to underpin their analysis of motivations for religious tourism and pilgrimage. They propose that holy sites, scared shrines and religious places will always host pilgrims who are strong believers and who will overcome the perceived risks, challenges, fears, worries and uneasiness. The debate of challenges and perceived risks to tourism has been discussed by some scholars in the religious tourism context (Korstanje & George, 2020; Korstanje, Raj & Griffin, 2018; Yang, and Nair, 2014, Korstanje, 2014; Baker, 2014; Lepp & Gibson 2003) ,

Nations like USA, UK, Italy, Spain, Japan, Russia, Germany, and China are struggling to control the COVID-19 pandemic. We now realise that we are facing biggest global economic test since the 9/11 terrorism attacks and this has impacted most intensely on the tourism industry. Thus, COVID-19 has major ramifications for the religious tourism industry and impacted on other related industries like hotels, transport, travel agents, tour guides and all related services such as restaurants and retail. The calamity of the COVID-19 pandemic is a new biological war that is being experienced by the whole world and having mammoth repercussions for the religious tourism industry.

The major religious tourism and pilgrimage destinations have been forced to close and are faced with socio-economic disaster for businesses who survive due to religious visitors. Across Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa and North and South America the borders are closed and airplanes have been grounded by most countries throughout the summer holiday period and the tourism industry has experienced an enormous downturn in visitors numbers. According to Zurab Pololikashvili the UNWTO Secretary-General:

*The world is facing an unprecedented health and economic crisis. Tourism has been hit hard, with millions of jobs at risk in one of the most labour-intensive sectors of the economy (UNWTO, 2020).*

Therefore, the religious tourism industry going to face very challenging times over the coming period. This will be more extreme in some countries with struggling economies and lead to high unemployment at a global scale. Over recent decades operationally, religious tourism has been affected by various conflicts and terror attack on holy places. Raj and Griffin (2017) argue the despite this, religious tourism and pilgrimage have recovered and maintained a place in society with ever changing political landscapes, cultural and traditions.

*Religious belief functions at both a conscious and a subconscious level in society. For years, people have travelled to visit sacred sites as part of their beliefs, which have acted as a powerful motive in undertaking a pilgrimage. Over the centuries religion has played a significant part in the development of religious buildings, rituals, festivals and ceremonial events to attract visitors (Raj & Griffin, 2017:3-4).*

Post-COVID-19, religious tourism will never be the same and it would difficult to recapture and accomplish a similar exponential growth of visitors to holy places. The question which needs to be asked of the religious tourism and pilgrimage industry is, how they will develop and transform new approaches that will help the growth strategies of key stakeholders. Future developments need to present a clear and logical understanding of the heterogeneity and framework needs to be developed to bring all stakeholders to the table, to determine future goals and objectives for a Post COVID-19 world. This devastating episode has left people struggling and livelihoods have been destroyed. Thus, it is imperative that religious communities continue making every effort to bring people together (albeit metaphorically) in these difficult times, and then redouble their efforts once COVID-19 restrictions begin to lift.

The religious tourism industry has previously survived regardless of wars, conflicts, diseases and terror attacks in the world. Likewise, tourism destinations in the world have shown very inspiring results and continue to develop and grow, but we cannot be complaisant. As noted by former UNWTO Secretary-General, Taleb Rifai

*Tourism is one of the most resilient and fastest-growing economic sectors but it is also very*

*sensitive to risks, both actual and perceived. As such, the sector must continue to work together with governments and stakeholders to minimize risks, respond effectively and build confidence among travellers* (UN News, 2016).

### **Impact of COVID-19 on Mass Gathering (MG)**

Previous studies have investigated and discussed the impact of infectious diseases on tourism (Kuo *et al.*, 2008; McAleer *et al.*, 2010; Leder *et al.*, 2013; Memish *et al.*, 2019). These studies have highlighted that infectious diseases significantly reduce international tourist arrivals to countries which have been affected by the outbreaks and reduce the national income of the countries. Following these models, COVID-19 is going to have a major economic impact on the tourism industry when compared with previous infectious diseases. This is most dramatic for countries and religious sites which depend on international visitors as source income and development.

The COVID-19 epidemic has now exceeded the death toll of the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the 2010 Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in Europe and the USA. At an early stage, this led to several major Mass Gathering (MG) related to religious events and festivals being cancelled. Ahmed and Memish (2020, np) highlight that coronavirus will cause a major impact on mass gathering events in 2020.

*In July, the South East Asian nation Japan hosts the summer Olympics, shortly after the world's largest MG, the Hajj, receives pilgrims to Mecca, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) from all over the world ... Drawing Muslims from over 180 nations, Hajj is the single most international MG in the world. KSA, acutely aware of its international pilgrim-travelers has been vigilant of the coronavirus outbreak from its inception.*

There is a major challenge for the World Health Organization (WHO) and experts to find a cure for COVID-19. Otherwise, coronavirus outbreaks at major Mass Gathering events will leave complications for organisers to control. The Mass Gathering of religious

pilgrims can act as a major epicenter for spreading COVID-19 around the world. The WHO has developed a clear action plan for religious tourism planners and other events organisers to follow in dealing with the risk:

- integration with national emergency planning and response plans for infectious diseases.
- command and control arrangements to facilitate the rapid communication of information and efficient situation analyses and decision-making.
- appropriate screening requirements for event participants – for example, will participants be screened for COVID-19 symptoms on arrival?
- disease surveillance and detection – for example, how will the disease be recognized and diagnosed in participants?
- treatment – for example, how and where will ill participants be isolated and treated?
- decision trigger points – for example, who will decide whether affected participants can continue or resume their role in the event? What trigger points will indicate the need to reconsider or revise the plans?

Internationally, religious tourism makes substantial contribution to the world economy and countries like Italy, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Nepal, Jordan, Spain, Iran and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Economic growth in these countries depends on religious traveller arrivals, who support many enterprises and create employment for local communities. Johansen (cited in FRH, 2014) states that religious tourism is growing fast and international economies relies on tourism for future development.

*Yes, religious tourism is big. And it's getting bigger. Researchers suggest the market is more resilient to recessions and is more open to repeat business than secular leisure travel ... the global faith-based travel sector is worth \$18 billion and includes 300 million travelers a year, the majority well educated and with comfortable incomes ... Studies show that 35 per cent of travelers want to take a faith-inspired vacation, so the market potential remains enormous,*

Religious tourism and pilgrimage over the years has impacted on international tourism. This is due to many factors including modern infrastructure which has facilitated easier international travel to holy sites, sacred shrines and religious places and thus, has influenced



these sites to attract visitors to help the sites themselves but also the local economy. Nowadays, many religious sites attract a heterogeneous mix of visitors for cultural, historic, heritage, architectural and many other forms of tourism in addition to the religious faithful. These multi-purpose travellers move in a manner characterised by multimodality, and thus interact with many other forms of tourism, although in many locations the religious tourism element maintains a prominent position within the tourism industry.

The COVID-19 crisis has globally impacted on the tourism sector, and caused major pandemonium, with countries closing their borders and airlines being grounded. This has left all potential travellers in a very infuriating position, not least being religious travellers. Religious events, festivals, ceremonies and pilgrimages have been cancelled. The latest data released by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) states the following:

- All world regions recorded large declines in arrivals in the first eight months of the year. Asia and the Pacific, the first region to suffer from the impact of COVID-19, saw a 79% decrease in arrivals, followed by Africa and the Middle East (both - 69%), Europe (-68%) and the Americas (-65%).
- International arrivals plunged 81% in July and 79% in August, traditionally the two busiest months of the year and the peak of the Northern Hemisphere summer season.
- The drop until August represents 700 million fewer arrivals compared to the same period in 2019
- The drop until August translates into a loss of US\$730 billion in export revenue from international tourism.
- To date (October 2020) the loss is more than eight times the loss experienced from the 2009 global economic

and financial crisis.

- UNWTO's Panel of Experts foresees a rebound in international tourism in 2021, mostly in the third quarter of 2021. However, around 20% of experts suggest the rebound might not occur until 2022. (UNWTO, 2020b)

The data show that losses are already having dramatic impact on tourism economies internationally, nationally, and locally. The European Commission further estimates that EU's hospitality industry will lose 50% of their income in year 2020. The southern European countries will suffer even more from COVID-19, as in some instances they are still recovering from the earlier global economic crisis.

### *Religion, Pilgrimage and the Future*

At the present time, religious tourism and pilgrimage are facing a real risk; the COVID-19 pandemic is forcing organisers and planners to expend enormous energy on the crisis, and in many situations, overlook the actual motivation for religious traveller's attachment to sacred or holy sites. Almost all of the current discourse on the impact of the virus, focuses on its monetary, and materialistic impacts. Ironically, while important, these corporeal considerations should be playing a secondary role to the spiritual, social, and self-development functions of religious sites.

The Religious tourism and pilgrimage industry faces major challenges during and post COVID-19. The emphasis to date, has been on the need to adopt measures to meet the short-term economic downturn and the long-term goals to develop and deliver safe procedures for

### **WHO Guidance Document for Mass Gatherings**

## **Key planning recommendations for mass gatherings in the context of COVID-19**

Interim guidance  
29 May 2020



religious tourism, in general, pilgrimages and related mass gatherings (MG). Local, national and international authorities in collaboration with religious events, festivals and pilgrimage planners are now implementing considerable measures to avoid, detect, monitor and manage COVID-19. Thus, enormous time, energy and resources are currently focused on the limitation and reduction of the virus. However, many groups, organisations and faith communities are also looking to the future. There is a multitude of evidence (as evidenced in many of the papers in this collection) that new forms of worship are emerging.

Going beyond the (highly detailed) guidelines for managing the virus at religious gatherings as detailed by organisations such as the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) many religious groups have displayed innovation and creativity in their practices and activities. One can now pray virtually (or send prayers to be undertaken on the virtual pilgrim's behalf) at most

of the major shrines and religious sites of the world. The question that this raises is how such practices will shape and influence religious tourism and pilgrimage into the future. While there is an intrinsic connection between physical presence and religious travel, proxy-pilgrimage, and thus, virtual pilgrimage are not unknown. Christian pilgrim accounts of the Holy land date to the 4th Century, and were written primarily for readers unable to undertake the pilgrimage themselves (British Library, 2020), and in the Middle Ages, there is evidence of Professional Pilgrims, who travelled on behalf of others (Roman, 2012). A similar situation exists in other religions such as Umrah and Hajj, which can be undertaken for others, and in many other faiths, one visits sites to pray for ancestors, relations and friends. Thus, the proxy nature of prayer is a well established feature of many pilgrimages. However, post COVID-19, it is expected that the response of religious adherents will be to engage in 'real' pilgrimage, to experience Turnerian *communitas* (Turner, 1974), which cannot be replaced by

Innovative Examples of Online Prayer and Pilgrimage		
Religious Site	Organisation	Link for Online Prayer
Saint Peter's Basilica, Vatican City	Vatican News – youtube site	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7E-LYc1wivk33ijt5bR5zQ">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7E-LYc1wivk33ijt5bR5zQ</a>
Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem	Christian Media Centre - Italian	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQLCoRUXCVA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQLCoRUXCVA</a>
Western Wall, Jerusalem	International Fellowship of Christians and Jews	Site for sending your prayers to the Western Wall: <a href="https://www.ifcj.org/stories/high-holy-days/your-prayer-at-the-western-wall/">https://www.ifcj.org/stories/high-holy-days/your-prayer-at-the-western-wall/</a>
Great Mosque of Mecca	Makkah Live - Youtube	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s-YfdndMZo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s-YfdndMZo</a>
Kashi Vishwanath Temple, Varanasi	Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust Web Page	<a href="https://www.shrikashivishwanath.org/online/live_darshan">https://www.shrikashivishwanath.org/online/live_darshan</a>
Golden Temple, Amritsar	Live Kirtan Darbar Youtube Channel	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjydC5TIqbc">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjydC5TIqbc</a>
Sakya Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism	Monastery Website, livestreaming links	<a href="https://www.sakya.org/live-streaming-video/">https://www.sakya.org/live-streaming-video/</a>
Walsingham Shrine	Waslingham Catholic TV	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXGOepDSmqU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXGOepDSmqU</a>
Sydney Bahá'í Temple	Facebook Page with live & recorded videos	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/SydneyBahaiTemple/">https://www.facebook.com/SydneyBahaiTemple/</a>
Knock Catholic Shrine, Ireland	Selection of Ceremonies online	<a href="https://www.knockshrine.ie/watch-live/?v=d2cb7bbc0d23">https://www.knockshrine.ie/watch-live/?v=d2cb7bbc0d23</a>
Ishiyama-dera Shingon Temple, Japan	Ishiyama-dera Temple Channel	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSlAT5LWdNc7ffRrbS6UVmw/videos">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSlAT5LWdNc7ffRrbS6UVmw/videos</a>

virtual technology.

## Conclusion

In a COVID-19 scenario, due to the particular configuration of pilgrimage experiences, there are very high level risks posed by international religious MG events and festivals. These present major challenges for organisers and planners for the duration of COVID-19. The repercussions for global faith are devastating. Because mass gathering (MG) of pilgrims can act as a breeding ground for viruses and illnesses, any such coming together of people in close proximity could become an epicenter for disease. Such MGs have been a very serious concern for the World Health Organization (WHO) particularly because many religious events are not planned or managed according to guidelines outlined by local, national or international health organisations.

There is abundant evidence available that MGs are breeding grounds for the spread of infectious diseases, both during the events themselves and also during the related transportation processes (Gautret, 2014; Sridhar, Gautret & Brouqu, 2014; Al-Lami *et al.*, 2013; Gautret & Steffen, 2016; Tabatabaei & Metanat, 2015; Zumla *et al.* 2018). Transmission of infection at such events can affect the pilgrims and the local community at the particular site, but can also be 'brought home' by the returning participants. Globally, infectious diseases have been observed in relation to religious pilgrimages to sacred or holy sites over the last 2 decades with plentiful evidence of epidemic outbreaks. This threat has always been issue for mass gatherings (MG) according to Memish who states:

*Increasingly, attention is being focused on vaccine-preventable diseases, such as cholera, polio, measles, and pertussis, which are increasing in the eastern Mediterranean owing to conflict and large refugee populations with poor access to preventive public health services. The highly lethal MERS-CoV causes increasing concern, as it continues to circulate in Saudi Arabia and remains in the top ten of the WHO Research and Development Blueprint list of infectious diseases likely to cause major epidemics (2019, np).*

What is needed going forward is a serious discussion by health professionals, faith leaders and tour organisers

on the need to professionalise the management and organisation of Religious MGs. This will require creativity, flexibility and innovation in order to put in place physical mitigation measures, in association with technological and other developments which might assist in controlling the spread of the current and potential future pandemics.

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